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SUBJECT: VIEWS ON GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE AMONG SOUTH INDIA'S CIVIL
SOCIETY LEADERS

REF: A) 09 KOLKATA 255 B) 08 NEW DELHI 2955

11. Summary. Civil society leaders report that ignorance about climate change pervades South India, with politicians, government officials, and business leaders focused on development at all costs. Despite widespread ignorance about the issue, civil society leaders still look to the government to drive the climate change agenda, and hope that enlightened consumers in the first world can nudge Indian government and industry into action. The lack of awareness of climate change in South India, which is one of India's most well-educated and prosperous regions, indicates that informed debate about India's climate change policies is a long way away. End Summary

Support for India's official position.

12. In the run up to the December 2009 Copenhagen summit, we met with leaders from South Indian civil society to discuss their views on global climate change. South India, with its vast coastline and population dependent on agriculture, fisheries and coastal tourism, is one of the regions in India most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Leaders from NGOs, state government, academia, and industry unanimously support the Government of India's position of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (ref A). We heard the refrain: "India did not create this problem, the developed countries did" so "they should help solve it." Our contacts said India should not accept any binding limitations for its legitimate development and economic goals, especially when citizens of developed countries have wasteful and extravagant lifestyles, consuming more than their fair share of the world's natural resources. At the same time, our contacts also acknowledged that India's external stance is unsustainable in the long run. "India cannot repeat others' mistakes; India cannot have one-dimensional growth," said Swaminathan Krishnamurthy, Associate Director of Climate Change and Sustainability Services for Ernst and Young.

Development trumps climate change concerns

13. Civil society leaders said that only top bureaucrats in environment and related ministries in the central government (ref B), and the Prime Minister's office are sensitive to climate change. Our contacts said that most of the country's political leaders and government officials are uninformed about climate change and doing little to change the situation. Indian Youth Climate Network's Saleem Khan believes governments at all levels are focused on development and economic growth at the expense of the environment.

14. Big business, especially multinationals in South India, is aware

of climate change, but remains focused on hard cost/benefits analysis and consumer perceptions. Confederation of Indian Industry's (CII) Karthikeyan, a counselor from CII's Green Business Center, acknowledges that medium, small and micro enterprises are generally ignorant of and apathetic to climate change. Our contacts said that the general population is similarly ignorant about and apathetic to climate change, which tracks the low level of awareness of and care for environmental matters in general in India. India's largely poor population is too busy trying to survive to know or care about climate change. Filmmaker and conservationist Shekar Dattari described society's attitude as "the environment is to be dealt with after everybody has a Nano," referring to the low cost car that Tata launched in 2008.

Looking to government to save the day

15. Civil society leaders look to the government for bold and decisive action to drive the climate change agenda, even as they recount the government's poor record in environmental protection. They believe that despite its external position, India's government must promptly institute substantive, time-bound, internal targets to reduce Indian industry's greenhouse gas emissions. Our contacts expect little progress without the government cracking the whip on industry and creating a credible framework for environmental enforcement. Nearly everyone cited the 2003 statewide implementation of mandatory rain water harvesting to address extended drought conditions in Tamil Nadu. The ordinance, which encountered strong resistance by the state's citizens at the time of its enactment, has since been viewed favorably and replicated by other governments in India.

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16. CII's Karthikeyan says industry supports the promotion of renewable energy and voluntary mechanisms, but does not support regulatory measures to combat climate change. Our civil society interlocutors, suspicious of industry, said that business needs to be prodded into action using both carrots and sticks, especially on energy conservation and alternate energy. Dr. S. Gomathinayagam of Centre for Wind Energy Technology, said that industry understands only money, or as he put it, "Vitamin M." Civil society leaders we consulted want government to provide meaningful and effective environmental education to the public, and foster earth-friendly alternatives such as subsidized CFLs and solar energy devices. A few acknowledged that without a fundamental change in the consumerist mindset of India's billion plus population, climate change and other environmental crises would only be exacerbated with time. They believe a combination of education, low cost green technology, and spirituality can help Indian society find long-term sustainable solutions.

And seeking outside help

17. Our contacts also believe that civil society in developed countries could help force change in India. They want enlightened overseas consumers to nudge India by imposing social practices requirements (e.g., refusing to purchase goods manufactured using polluting technologies) and governmental restrictions (carbon taxes or similar levies). Our contacts cited as a model the role of the developed world in helping reduce the use of child labor in India. They also said developed countries should offer green technology at nominal or no cost, and help not just in mitigation efforts but also in adaptation.

18. Comment. The low level of awareness of climate change our contacts ascribe to political leaders, government officials, industry, and the general population is discouraging but not surprising in a country where many people struggle to simply survive. But if South India -- home to one of the country's most well-educated and prosperous populations -- is uneducated about and apathetic to climate change, then the Indian body politic has a long way to go before it can intelligently consider its responses to the challenge. Ignorance and apathy about climate change and general support for the government of India's stance in international

negotiations mean that it will be difficult to shift Indians away from their development-at-all-costs approach. Views from the U.S. government will likely be ignored by Indians. The greater impact will arise from people-to-people interactions, especially through collaboration on education and the environment, through which the credibility of U.S. civil society may influence opinions in India. End comment.

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